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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000489

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: STUDENT PROTEST OVER NEW DRAFT LAW ENTERS

SECOND WEEK; LARGE DEMONSTRATIONS PLANNED

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

SUMMARY

¶2. (SBU) Nearly one thousand university students in Yerevan continued to boycott their classes in protest of the proposed "Law on Military Service" currently before the National Assembly. The controversial draft law, strongly supported by the Ministry of Defense, would end all draft deferments for graduate study. The student protestors claim that the law dilutes the quality of Armenian science, and have formed an umbrella group "For the Development of Science" to coordinate future demonstrations and lobbying efforts. The group plans further public demonstrations and a march to the National Assembly (NA) in the next five days. End Summary.

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY TO CONSIDER CONSCRIPTION REFORMS

¶3. (U) The GOAM recently submitted "The Law on Military Service" to the National Assembly for consideration. The proposed law removes draft deferments for students in master's programs and the full exclusion provided to full-time Ph.D. students. (Note: The National Statistical Service reports that 149 of the 155 full-time Ph.D. students in Armenia are men. End Note.) All Armenian men would be required to serve in the army, either when they reach the age 18 or when they finish their four-year undergraduate education. The GOAM sees two benefits to this law: an additional 1,000 men eligible for military service yearly, and a more academically dedicated and diverse applicant pool for post-graduate programs. The National Assembly will vote on the draft law in its first reading on March 1 or 2.

MALE STUDENTS PROTEST, BOYCOTT

¶4. (SBU) Male undergraduate and graduate students strongly oppose the law. Several Ph.D. students created the group "For the Development of Science" to coordinate student opposition to the bill. The group staged protests at Yerevan State University February 18-20, in which approximately 1000 students participated, and have encouraged a boycott of classes since February 18. Minister of Defense Serzh Sarksian convened a town-hall style meeting for youth that the action group also boycotted after discovering that the majority of the 120 seats had been reserved for the pro-government National Youth Council. Armenian television footage showed the meeting as almost "Komsomol-like" with the youth looking approvingly on as Sarksian lectured about civic virtues.

FOR THE SAKE OF SCIENCE!

¶5. (SBU) The protestors claim that the law will degrade the quality of Armenian science. In a press conference held on February 18, leaders of "For the Development of Science" stated that they were not seeking to avoid their own military service, rather preserve the integrity of the Armenian scientific field. The students argue that if they are not allowed to directly follow their undergraduate studies with a master's or Ph.D. program, they may lose interest in academics and never return to school. They further contend that dedicated students may flee the country in a "brain-drain" to pursue studies elsewhere and never return to Armenia if the law is passed.

MAYOR'S OFFICE DENIES PERMITS FOR FUTURE RALLIES

16. (SBU) "For the Development of Science" held a meeting that filled a local movie theater February 25. With an audience that was roughly 90 percent male, students, professors, a former army colonel, and one parliamentarian spoke against the law, which one professor described as "a genocide campaign against science." Form letters to National Assembly members were awaiting rally participants' signatures. Erik Grigoryan, a Yerevan State University undergraduate student who has organized many of the campaign's events, told us that the group plans to flood the National Assembly with such letters. The students announced that two future rallies were also planned for February 28 and March 1. On March 1, the students plan to march through the city to the parliament building to stage the demonstration. Grigoryan said that while the Mayor's Office had denied permits to stage the demonstrations, they would not be canceled. He recognized that anyone participating could be administratively detained for demonstrating without a permit.

STUDENTS USE MEDIA, WEB TO SPREAD MESSAGE

17. (SBU) In its second week, "For the Development of Science" has developed an impressive level of sophistication in their efforts. The students are issuing daily press releases (in Armenian, Russian, and English) to all media outlets, providing information on the day's developments and announcing future events. The group also has a website (<http://all-students.nm.ru>), where they have posted all the press releases, a calendar of activities, and photos of demonstrations. As shown by the recent rally, their techniques have been effective in turning out relatively large numbers of demonstrators at their scheduled events.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) The "Law on Military Service" has aroused student passion like no other recent issue, including the 2003 elections. Though it is questionable that the students really seek to preserve "scientific progress" rather than their own draft deferments, they have quickly developed a campaign with a message backed by not-insignificant momentum. The students' growing number of supporters and effective use of the media to promote their message sharply contrasts with the parliamentary opposition's largely failed efforts to organize large anti-government protests. Though the success of the students' campaign remains to be seen, their efforts have managed to, at least for the moment, mobilize their previously apolitical and passive peers.
ORDWAY